



# Stella

*Neil Bartlett*

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Thomas Ernest Boulton and Frederick William Park were two Victorian cross-dressers and suspected homosexuals who appeared as defendants in a celebrated trial in London in 1871, charged "with conspiring and inciting persons to commit an unnatural offence". After the prosecution failed to establish that they had anal sex, which was then a crime, or that wearing women's clothing was in any sense a crime, both men were acquitted. Ernest Boulton (1848-1904) was the son of a stockbroker. From childhood he liked wearing female clothing, and was encouraged in his impersonations of maids and other women by his mother; he used the nickname "Stella". As a young man he met Frederick William Park and the two became friends. Park, who was of similar age, was an articled clerk (law student) at a solicitor in London and his father was Master of a superior court. Boulton worked as a clerk at his uncle's stockbroking firm and subsequently at a bank, before leaving in 1866 or 1867. The two men then formed a theatrical double act, touring as Stella Clinton (or Mrs Graham) and Fanny Winifred Park, and receiving favourable press reviews for their performances. For around two years they also frequented the West End of London in both women's and men's dress, attending theatres and social events. They were ejected from both the Alhambra Theatre and the Burlington Arcade on several occasions. On one occasion they were bound over to keep the peace after being mistaken for women dressed as men. A third person involved in the affair was Lord Arthur Clinton, who had lived with "Stella" as husband and had exchanged love letters with Stella. On the evening of 28 April 1870 Boulton, Park and another man were seen leaving a house in Wakefield Street, near Regent Square, by a police detective, who followed them as they took a cab to the Strand Theatre. There the detective saw them meet two others, described as "gentlemen", before the party entered a private box inside the theatre. A police superintendent and a police sergeant joined the detective during the performance, and Boulton, Park and one of the others, Hugh Alexander Mundell, were arrested as they attempted to leave the theatre. The others escaped. The three arrested men were subjected to intimate examination by a police doctor in order to establish whether they had had anal sex. When brought before the magistrate, Frederick Flowers, at Bow Street Magistrates' Court the next day, Boulton and Park were still wearing women's clothing, which was described in some detail in newspaper reports. Mundell claimed that he had believed that Boulton and Park were women, even though he had previously met them while they were dressed in men's clothes. He was given bail, but Boulton and Park were not. The case attracted considerable attention and a large crowd had collected in Bow Street to see the two leave in a police van. Subsequent magistrates' court hearings also attracted unusually large numbers of spectators to witness the proceedings. The trial began on 9 May 1871 at the Court of Queen's Bench, before a special jury. It was presided over by Sir Alexander Cockburn, the Lord Chief Justice. At the hearing Boulton and Park's lifestyle attracted great public interest, especially when a trunkful of their dresses was brought in as evidence. However, the unreliability of the witnesses and their physical examination by the police without higher authority swayed opinion in their favour. The prosecution was unable to prove either that they had committed any homosexual offence or that the wearing of women's clothing by men was an offence in English law. Cockburn's summing up was critical of the prosecution's case and the behaviour of the police. After deliberating for fifty-three minutes the jury found them not guilty.

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